

To: Wisconsin Works (W-2) Agency Directors

From: Bill Clingan
Division Administrator

PURPOSE

The purpose of this Administrator's memo is to address the employment goal of the Wisconsin Works (W-2) program, identify a number of W-2 policy priorities and outline strategies aimed at assisting W-2 agencies in achieving the employment goals of the W-2 program.

BACKGROUND

In 1997, Wisconsin replaced the Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC) program with W-2, a temporary cash assistance program with the primary goal of leading families to self-sufficiency by connecting low-income job seekers with work. The program was designed to connect individuals with appropriate work as soon as possible.

In 2004, this goal and model continue. Although a struggling economy has challenged the W-2 program, emerging news on the economic front is positive. An improving Wisconsin economy that has shown the highest job growth in the Midwest and, as of April 2004, the lowest unemployment rate since April 2001 will aid in our efforts to implement W-2 under our current financial pressures.

Support for an employment focus in W-2 is underscored by Governor Doyle's *Grow Wisconsin* and *KidsFirst* initiatives. Governor Doyle recognizes that Wisconsin must create opportunities for parents to become economically self-sufficient and that the best social program is a good paying job.

W-2 POLICY PRIORITIES

In order to support W-2 as an employment program and ensure that sufficient W-2 resources are available throughout the current W-2 contract cycle, the Division is focusing on strengthening the following policies and will be issuing further guidance shortly.

Up-Front Workforce Attachment

W-2 agencies must reinforce a sense of expectation that W-2 participants will become a part of Wisconsin's workforce as quickly as possible. It is essential that this be communicated when a job seeker first applies for W-2. The Division is working on ensuring an up-front workforce attachment model and will provide guidelines on the spectrum of services and job development activities W-2 agencies are expected to provide from the date of application to placement in employment or a W-2 employment position. Both the W-2 job seeker and the FEP should be strategic and assertive in pursuing employment possibilities and share mutual responsibility for a successful outcome.

Comprehensive Career Assessment Process

A comprehensive career assessment will best inform the participant and the Financial and Employment Planner (FEP) of both immediate job placement opportunities as well as long term steps needed for the job seeker to move towards their career goal. As both a part of the up-front workforce attachment model and ongoing case management, FEPs must assess a job seeker's interests, aptitudes, skills, work experience, education, and achievements and, through the use of current labor market information, career information, and career research, develop short term and long term career goals.

Because a comprehensive career assessment includes the identification of limitations or barriers, the Barrier Screening Tool (BST) was introduced in 2003 to W-2 agencies as a primary resource for identifying barriers to employment. Although it is critical to use this tool to identify barriers early and address issues that may impede a W-2 participant's progress toward obtaining employment, agencies should bear in mind that not all barriers preclude participation in unsubsidized employment or a Trial Job placement.

W-2 Employment Position Placements

Over 50% of our W-2 job seekers are currently in a Community Service Job (CSJ) placement. Aligning CSJs more closely with employment is key to making W-2 more effective and efficient as a workforce attachment program. The division is currently working on improving the following areas of CSJ administration:

1. Closer connections between CSJ participation and an individualized employability plan for each participant;
2. More deliberate structuring of and greater variety of strategic placement options with the CSJ placement;
3. More rigorous case monitoring and management through collaboration between FEPs, participants, worksite supervisors and employers; and
4. Intensified employer recruitment, job development, and worksite maintenance efforts.

The common objective of all these strategies is to translate briefer, more strategic CSJ participation directly into sustainable unsubsidized employment.

W-2 agencies can begin to move in this direction by thoroughly reviewing their CSJ caseloads. In this review, agencies must ensure that all CSJ participants, whether full or prorated, are intensively engaged in work experience activities linked to a clear employability goal. In addition, agencies must identify individuals with some stated employment history or as identified by Unemployment Insurance (UI) wage records. For those individuals with a work history, particularly if that work history is recent and significant, placement in an Unsubsidized Employment (UE) position as quickly as possible with assertive job placement assistance must be a priority. We encourage agencies to make use of existing reporting tools, such as the W-2 Placement Activities report to evaluate participant placement and assigned activities.

Employability Plan Design

Placements in employment positions should reflect and be managed in accordance with employability plans designed in consultation between FEPs and participants.

Employability plans should be based on the comprehensive career assessment of each W-2 job seeker and embody realistic goals that take into account both the results of the assessment and the dynamics of the local labor market.

To the fullest extent possible, the immediate activities and short-term objectives mapped by the employability plan should connect the participant quickly with an identified area of labor market growth while advancing the participant along a defined career track.

Job Retention and Advancement

- Participating in W-2 may launch a W-2 job seeker in the direction of their career goal but continued progress towards that goal may likely happen after W-2 program participation has ended. Moving job seekers into employment is only the first step on the road to self-sufficiency. W-2 mandates case management follow-up services for all W-2 participants who obtain employment. However, W-2 is only one of a number of programs designed to assist Wisconsin's workforce with job retention and advancement. W-2 participants have access to local labor and workforce resources that they may use to augment their ultimate success. W-2 agencies should facilitate connections between participants and these resources, such as nursing homes assistants, home health care aides, hotel, restaurant and movie theatre workers, or retail sales to ensure continued career advancement.

DEPARTMENT OF WORKFORCE DEVELOPMENT (DWD) STRATEGIES

In order to assist W-2 agencies in making the most of limited resources while fulfilling the primary W-2 program goal of moving job seekers into work, DWD will work with W-2 agencies to carry out several short, medium, and long-term strategies.

Short-term strategies will focus on streamlining counter productive regulations and ensuring that W-2 employment placements are being used appropriately. These strategies include:

- Affirming that W-2 is an employment and training program.
- Developing the up-front workforce attachment services model offered at application.
- Examining current CSJ practice to focus on such issues as use of the prorated CSJ placement and possible refinement of policies to focus on intensive services that rapidly prepare participants for unsubsidized employment.
- Providing case closure instructions for nonparticipation and loss of contact.
- Using available resources as incentives for caseload reductions.
- Working more aggressively with employers to fill jobs in existing workforce shortage areas.
- Providing training for W-2 agency staff on job readiness, career advising and employability planning.

Medium-term strategies will also focus on moving the most employable into work more quickly through policy updates and access to appropriate employment supports. These strategies include:

- Ensuring early engagement in employment and training services that prepare W-2 job seekers for obtaining and retaining employment.
- Developing worksites, short-term training and other services that better prepare W-2 job seekers for employment.
- Establishing a forum for ongoing sharing of best practices.
- In the next state budget, consideration of funding for initiatives such as Workforce Attachment and Advancement (WAA), transportation assistance, Community Reinvestment, Trial Jobs Plus and job loans.
- Increasing monitoring efforts to ensure that job seekers are successfully moving into unsubsidized employment positions.
- Emphasizing the importance of a strong relationship with the employer community.
- Providing staff training that reflects program priorities.

Long-term strategies will focus on improving connections to appropriate resources for our more barriered job seekers and supporting job retention and advancement for W-2 job seekers that have obtained employment. These strategies include:

- Better service coordination between W-2 agencies and Workforce Investment Act (WIA) programming, technical college system and other workforce systems to assist entry level W-2 graduates to advance in the workplace and achieve economic self-sufficiency.
- Examine the need for an integrated service delivery for W-2/Division of Vocational Rehabilitation (DVR) participants.
- Aggressive system improvements in transitioning eligible W-2 participants to Supplemental Security Income (SSI) as quickly as possible.

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